

Iraq experience changes fitness specialist's outlook on life

by Rachel Newton

With her bright smile, bubbly personality and motivating spirit, Jorgia McKinney, has returned to Pine Bluff Arsenal in the same capacity as she left it – working as a fitness specialist with Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR). When you listen to her, you can tell fitness is definitely a passion. However, because of her recent experiences in Iraq, you can tell her life has changed forever.

McKinney was the guest speaker at the Federally Employed Women's Oct. 20 meeting held at the National Center for Toxicological Research/Jefferson Labs.

"One of the benefits MWR has to offer to everyone in this room, which most are not taking advantage of, is a free membership to the fitness center," she said. "We have Cybex – which is top of the line weight-lifting equipment. Even though the outside of the facility isn't pretty, what we have inside is quality equipment."

McKinney grew up in the quad city area of Moline, Ill., and holds a bachelor's degree in physical education and corporate fitness with a minor in nutrition and a master's degree in physical education and fitness management from Western Illinois University. She has also worked with Washington Group International, Raytheon Demil Company and was a recreation specialist on Johnston Island, which was recently decommissioned as a chemical weapons demilitarization site.

"We are getting ready to start volleyball," she said. "Volleyball will be offered once or twice a month. It will be for everyone. You can bring your kids. We are also going to start yoga again and if there is interest maybe Pilates."

All these things are great for you, said McKinney. "When you exercise, not only do you look better but you feel better. How you feel inside can truly effect how you feel outside. If I feel good about myself, I'm going to treat you good."

McKinney said truly feeling good about yourself is something she has learned over the years. "It is important that we get along and get benefits from each other," she said. "If you are having a hard day, let me help you. I will get you a schedule. I'm not going to kill you; I'm going to do something that you want to do. I want to make exercise fun because it is fun."

Most recently McKinney worked as a MWR director in Baghdad, Iraq. As director, she helped develop, coordinate and structure three MWR centers over a four-month period to accommodate over 6,200 military and civilian personnel in a combat environment.

"I know you have heard all the bad things on the news," she said. "But there are so many good things that everyone here should be proud of."

Immunization shots are one good thing that has happened, she said. "People there have not even had health care or learned how to brush their teeth. Women are going to school. They haven't known any different until now."

McKinney, who worked in North and South Victory Baghdad, said that the proudest moment in her life was going to Iraq and opening up areas that were

not available to the Soldiers. "Most of the things I did were for the military. I made a huge difference there. I know that. The Soldiers had nothing."

During her time there, she said that she opened up libraries, swimming pools that were formerly owned by Saddam Hussein, a nine-hole miniature golf course constructed by the Soldiers, a batting cage, and an Internet café. "It was really great," she said. "Some of the Soldiers have been there over 18 months and had not seen their spouses. It was really important just from seeing reactions that spouses on the web cams could see the Soldiers."

Everyone here should be proud of what we have done in Iraq, said Jorgia. "What the Soldiers have done for us is amazing, what we have done to help the people in Iraq is amazing," she said. "We have done some good things. It isn't all bad. I don't want us to forget that."

McKinney said that the biggest thing that has changed is her view on life. "When you start feeling better about yourself, everything looks brighter. I have learned some life lessons," she said, her voice wavering with emotion. "Life is too short. My life has totally changed. You need to realize how important your life is and how you treat people."

"And, while doing all that you can exercise and make more friends," she said enthusiastically, making the crowd laugh. "Feel good. Live longer. Isn't that what life is all about?"

Cutline

Lori Castleberry (right), president of the Bluff Center Chapter of Federally Employed Women, presents a certificate of appreciation to Jorgia McKinney at the October FEW meeting. McKinney, who recently returned to the arsenal as a fitness specialist, spoke to the group about fitness and her experiences as a Morale Welfare and Recreation director in Iraq. (U.S. Army photo by Rachel Newton)